Fairbury Had Electricity by 1890

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By the 1880s, electricity began to be used in many towns. Because electricity was new technology in that era, it was unknown whether towns should build publicly owned generators or rely on private industry to provide electricity. The generators were called "light or lighting plants" in those times.

In 1888, Bloomington decided to construct a publicly owned electric light plant. In 1890, Henry Foster built the first lighting plant in Fairbury. Mr. Foster was born in Livingston County and became a country school teacher. Henry Foster then became a teacher in the Pontiac schools.

In 1889, Mr. Foster built Pontiac's first lighting plant. The year 1890 was a busy one for Mr. Foster. He became the Livingston County School Superintendant. Mr. Foster also built Fairbury's first lighting plant. He named his company Foster Bros. The initial location of his power-generating plant has yet to be discovered. Mr. Foster served one term as president of the Illinois Electrical Association.

In 1891, Mr. Foster shut down his first electrical generating plant and built a new one on the west end of the Arcade Block. The Arcade Block started at the southwest corner of Locust and First Streets and extended west. The Blade reported the new lighting plant would take 30 days to construct. During that period, people had to utilize the moon's light.

The 1892 Sanborn Insurance map shows the Foster Bros. electric light plant on the Arcade Block's west end. The plant burned coal which created steam. The steam was then used to drive three dynamos.

In 1894, the Fairbury coal miners threatened to go on strike. Without coal, the electric light plant and the city water works would have to shut down. The city water works burned coal which created steam, and the steam then drove the water pumps. The clay field tile factories would also be shut down. Fortunately, the Walton Bros. coal mine miners ignored their union and did not go on strike.

In 1895, Colfax built a city-owned lighting plant. Besides the street lamps, their lighting plant powered 525 incandescent light bulbs, forty businesses, five halls, and three churches. That same year, Mr. C. C. McDonald of Fairbury built a privately owned lighting plant at Chenoa.

The Foster Bros. electric light plant is shown on the 1898 Sanborn map with the steam boiler producing 80 horsepower to drive three dynamos. The small building had a one-inch diameter hose 25 feet long to fight a fire.

There are often catastrophic accidents until all the "bugs" are worked out with new technology. In 1901, the boiler at the Paxton publicly owned electric light plant blew up and killed the engineer.

In 1910, a possible strike by Fairbury coal miners threatened the lighting plant and the city's drinking water supply. The 1911 Sanborn map shows the lighting plant was still at its exact location at the west end of the Arcade Block.

In 1911, a new boiler was installed at the Foster Bros. electric lighting company. That same year, the Central Illinois Utilities Company was created in Chicago. The new company quickly started supplying electricity to the towns of Chatsworth, Piper City, Forrest, Gilman, Paxton, Milford, Saybrook, Gibson City, Onarga, Watseka, and Arrowsmith.

In 1912, Henry Foster sold his Foster Bros. electric lighting company to the CIUC firm. The Fairbury Plant provided DC electricity to Fairbury and some AC electricity to light homes. Most of the AC power came from a CIUC generating plant in Watseka via high-voltage lines to Fairbury. Also, in 1912, the City of Fairbury granted a 30-year franchise to CIUC. The maximum rate was 10 cents per kilowatt-hour for lighting and eight cents for power.

On the early evening of May 2, 1913, it was dark and rainy at Fairbury. Two 6,600-volt power lines came loose from the pole at a railroad track crossing two miles east of Fairbury. Mr. J. C. Master drove his horse-drawn buggy with Joe Denniwitz from Fairbury to his farm. The two men did not see the downed high-voltage power lines, and the lines touched and instantly killed the horse. Mr. Master put his hand on the steel buggy wheel when he got out, and he was severely shocked. Mr. Master survived the accident.

In September of 1916, the CIUC lighting plant burned down to the ground on the west end of the Arcade Block in Fairbury. The loss was estimated to be about $9,000. In today's dollars, this amount would be equivalent to $248,000.

After the fire, the city still had electricity for the lights because the alternating current came from Watseka. The Fairbury plant could no longer produce direct current for the local newspapers, two grain elevators, and several other business places.

The Blade had several editorials stating that electricity from Watseka was unreliable and the City of Fairbury should build a publicly owned power plant. A month after the fire in Fairbury, Gibson City voted to create its own municipal power plant. Fairbury Alderman G. R. McCabe and J. T. Wilcox went to Bloomington to review their publicly owned power plant a few months after the fire.

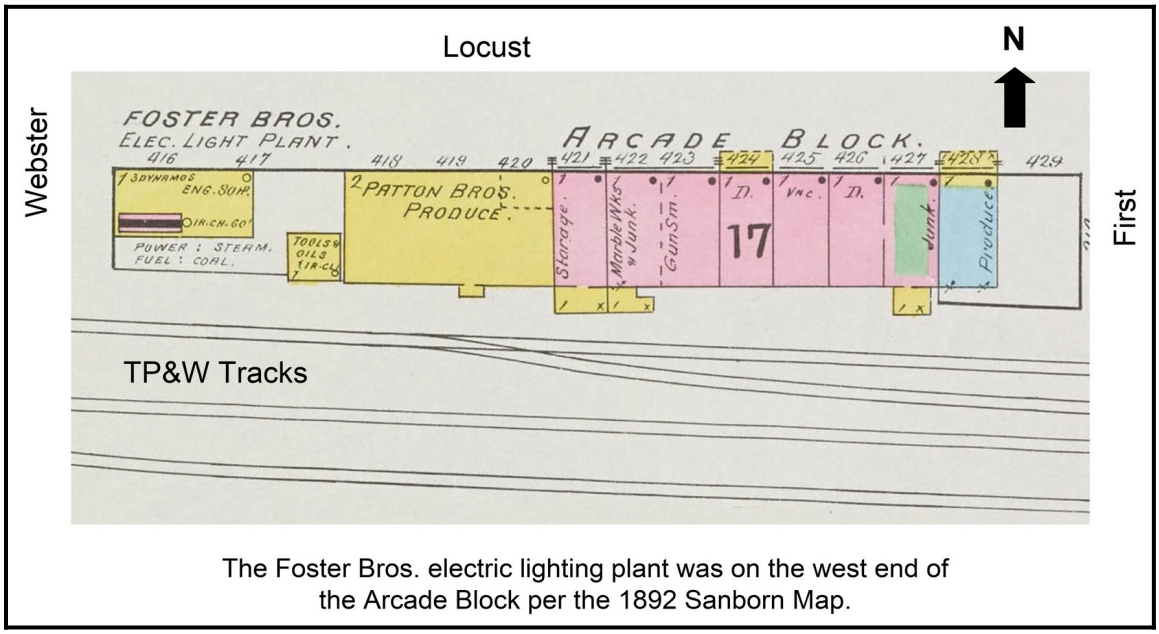
It is believed that after the fire, the CIUC firm installed transformers in Fairbury to create the DC power several businesses needed. In 1918, CIUC published a notice in the Blade

that electrical rates would increase. City officials again broached the topic of Fairbury building its own power plant. In an election in 1918, the proposal to build a city-owned power plant was defeated.

The 1924 Sanborn map shows a new small building at the west end of the Arcade Block. Instead of a generator system, the building housed electrical transformers.

The 30-year franchise granted to CIUC in 1912 expired in 1942. In 1940, some city officials raised the option of not renewing the franchise and instead building a city-owned power plant. At this point, the Central Illinois Public Service (CIPS) had taken over the CIUC firm. Officials from CIPS noted that there were over 200 city-owned electric companies at one time. By 1942, there were only 39 cities left that operated their own generating facilities. The CIPS official told the Fairbury City Council the overall trend was switching to corporate-owned utilities. CIPS promised to reduce rates by $800 if the city would extend the franchise for 50 more years. Fairbury decided not to pursue building its own city-owned electric company.

In 1948, CIPS became a publicly owned company. In 1997, Ameren became the new name for CIPS. Although Fairbury considered building a city-owned electric generating plant several times, private companies have always provided electricity.



The Foster Bros. electric lighting plant was on the west end of the Arcade Block per the 1892 Sanborn Map.